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Media Relations

UNH Developers Share Honors For Oil Spill Response Tool

May 9, 2011

DURHAM, N.H. – A Web-based oil spill response tool developed by the University of New Hampshire's Research Computing & Instrumentation Center (RCI) has been honored as a finalist for the prestigious Samuel J. Heyman Service to America Medal. The tool – Environmental Response Management Application, or ERMA® – was developed in partnership with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the UNH/NOAA Coastal Response Research Center and was essential in coordinating the response to the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

The ERMA® team, which is led by Amy Merten, spatial data branch chief for NOAA's Office of Response and Restoration, was among 34 finalists for the Service to American Medal announced on Capitol Hill last week. The Samuel J. Heyman Service to America Medal, from the Partnership for Public Service, honors outstanding federal workers who are making high-impact contributions critical to the health, safety and well-being of Americans. The medals are considered the most prestigious awards for American civil servants; finalists are contenders for one of eight Sammie awards to be presented Sept. 15, 2011.

ERMA® is a finalist for the Homeland Security Medal.

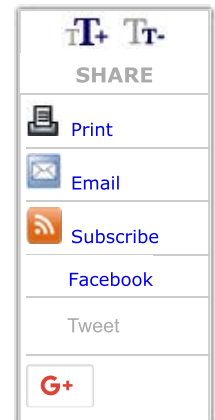
"The Coastal Response Research Center, a NOAA/UNH partnership, is proud to have launched ERMA® and to see it become a major asset to spill response so rapidly," says Nancy Kinner, professor of civil and environmental engineering at UNH and co-director of the Coastal Response Research Center.

"This is truly a great honor and I credit my entire staff, who have worked so effectively together in the success of this effort. Now a full year after the spill the two lead developers are working on making ERMA® even better in preparation for any future events," says Patrick Messer, director of UNH's Research Computing & Instrumentation Center.

ERMA® was started more than three years ago as a pilot for New Hampshire's Great Bay by several UNH developers, including Rob Braswell of the Complex Systems Research Center and Kurt Schwehr of the Center for Coastal and Ocean Mapping. It has since evolved into a Web-based GIS platform that incorporates data from the various agencies that work together to tackle response to oil spills. Round-the-clock work by UNH's RCI, in particular technical lead Robert St. Lawrence and information technologist Philip Collins, redeployed the Gulf of Mexico version of ERMA® in several hours, within days after the Deepwater Horizon spill began. ERMA® integrated the latest data on the oil spill's trajectory, fishery closure areas, wildlife and place-based Gulf Coast resources into one customizable interactive map, providing officials with continuous information on the worst oil spill in the nation's history and helping shape critical decisions on how they responded to the environmental disaster.

"It allowed us to have a complete picture of what we were doing and what was occurring in the Gulf. The technology has been there, but it's never been applied in a disaster that was this large scale," said Ret. Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen, the national incident commander for the spill. Allen also praised Merten as instrumental in setting up the situational awareness system, and with her team, keeping the voluminous data flowing every day of the lengthy crisis. "She combines the technical expertise and knowledge of information technology and data systems with a sense of mission," he said.

In June, after securing additional hardware capacity, NOAA launched a public version of ERMA® created by UNH – www.geoplatform.gov -- to facilitate communication and coordination among a variety of users, from federal, state and local responders to local community leaders and the public. Beyond NOAA data, it includes data from Homeland Security, the Coast Guard, the Fish and Wildlife Service, EPA, NASA, U.S. Geological Survey and the Gulf states. It is designed to be fast, user-friendly and constantly updated. Geoplatform.gov had 3.4 million hits in the first day of its release.



In fall of 2010, ERMA® was recognized as one of the top 10 government websites by Government Computer News. In addition, ERMA's® NOAA collaborators received the 2010 NOAA Administrator's and Technology Transfer Award. The ERMA® team has begun building another system for the Arctic and the U.S. Pacific Islands, and is updating the other ERMA programs developed for use in New England and the Caribbean.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 12,200 undergraduate and 2,300 graduate students.

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